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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000803

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/02/2019
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: TUNISIAN GOV'T STEPPING UP ACTIONS AGAINST
INDEPENDENT MEDIA

REF: TUNIS 748

Classified By: Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and(d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Following a series of assaults at Tunis Airport in early October (reftel), the last two weeks have seen, according to civil society sources, further government action against independent journalists. A journalist related to poloff how he was briefly abducted, bound, and beaten shortly after he had discussed on BBC radio the alleged corruption of First Lady Leila Ben Ali, and another was arrested on allegedly trumped up rape charges. A prominent blogger critical of the government also described to us how he was assaulted on the street in an attack also presumed in activist circles to have been politically motivated, and the managers of an unlicensed Internet radio station told us police seized their equipment and padlocked the station's doors. Another journalist known for his criticism of the government was arrested and charged with "harming others on the Internet" after he posted footage he had filmed of environmental violations in an industrial zone. His trial begins November 3. End summary.

¶2. (C) On October 28, Slim Boukhdar, a prominent independent journalist known for his criticism of the Ben Ali government, told civil society contacts he was seized by several unidentified men. Boukhdar said he was blindfolded and bound and forced into a car which took him to a park in downtown Tunis. There, Boukhdar subsequently related to poloff, he was beaten, verbally assaulted, and threatened with murder. He was left without his shoes, wallet, or cell phone. Boukhdar told poloff the assailants repeatedly warned him to "leave the woman alone." Earlier in the day, Boukhdar had given an interview to BBC Arabic radio in which he accused First Lady Leila (Trabelsi) Ben Ali of corruption.

¶3. (C) On October 26, independent journalist Taoufiq Ben Brik told poloff he was sitting in his parked car when a car driven by an unidentified woman collided with his own. According to Ben Brik, when he got out of the car to inspect the damage, the woman driver began to scream, tear at her clothes, and run away. Police shortly issued an arrest warrant against Ben Brik on charges of attempted rape. Ben Brik told poloff that he believed the incident had been staged by the government in revenge for several articles critical of the government he had posted the week before on French websites. Before turning himself in to police on October 29, he reached out by telephone to several western diplomats to protest his innocence.

¶4. (C) Embassy contact Salah Fourti, manager of "Radio 6," an independent (and unlicensed) Internet radio station, told poloff that on October 22, police with a search warrant entered station offices. Fourti said police informed him that his operation was illegal. (Note: Fourti applied for a license several years ago but the GOT has still not given him permission to run the station. End note.) Fourti told us the police seized station computers and related equipment,

and sealed the doors with heavy duty padlocks. Embassy officers had visited his station earlier in the week to observe the on air "sit-in" he and colleagues were conducting to protest the GOT's refusal to allow independent radio and other media outlets to operate legally in the country.

¶5. (C) On October 20, independent journalist Zouhaier Makhlouf was arrested by police on charges of "harming others on the Internet," according to several civil society sources.

In mid-October, Makhlouf posted on the Internet footage he and a colleague had filmed documenting environmental damage and dangerous working conditions in an industrial district of Nabeul, 50 miles south east of Tunis. Makhlouf's spouse announced on October 22 that she was beginning a hunger strike in protest of his arrest. Makhlouf has long been in the government's cross-hairs as a contributor to an independent news website (assabilonline.com) filled with anti-Ben Ali content. Makhlouf has also often posted material critical of the government on Facebook and YouTube. His trial begins November 3 in Grombalia, 20 miles south of Tunis.

¶6. (C) On October 15, Embassy contact and prominent blogger Zied El-Heni told us he was beaten up by a plainclothes attacker in the early evening when he was walking in a quiet residential area of Carthage, northeast of Tunis' city center. El-Heni said he had received two warnings from colleagues that strangers had been asking about his movements. El-Heni's blog, often filled with criticism of the Ben Ali government, is regularly blocked by the government, but he continuously reestablishes it at new URL addresses.

¶7. (C) Both Fourti and El-Heni had met with DRL Office Director Kay Mayfield during her mid-October visit to Tunisia. However, El-Heni did not attribute the attack to his contact with the USG. Instead he said he thought he was receiving extra attention because he had used his blog to announce that he had a copy of a new book published in Paris highly critical of President Ben Ali's wife Leila Trabelsi and offered to send the book to anyone interested.

¶8. (C) Discussing recent incidents with poloff, Fourti and El-Heni each took their treatment in stride, having faced it before. They said these acts will not stop them from continuing to agitate for more press freedom. However, Fourti said he was not sure how he will replace his internet broadcasting equipment.

GRAY